DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 283 409 HE 020 046

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TITLE A Description of a Student-Staffed, Competency-Based Laboratory for the Assessment of Interpersonal Communication Skills.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 21p.; Paper collected as part of the American Association for Higher Education Assessment Forum.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication Skills; *Competency Based Education; Educational Objectives; Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; *Peer Evaluation; Skill Development; *Speech Communication; Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *AAHE Assessment Forum; *Golden West College CA

ABSTRACT

A competency-based skill development and assessment procedure is used in an interpersonal communication course (SpCom 100) at Golden West College in California. SpCom 100, which offers 18 to 24 sections each semester, includes eight units: the interpersonal process, conversation, self-concept and disclosure, perception, verbal language, nonverbal communication and emotions, listening and feedback, and assertion and conflict management. Students learn and practice seven developmental skills: initiating and managing a conversation, clarifying perceptions, using descriptive language, expressing emotions, using active listening, responding with relational feedback, and using assertive messages. Assessments of student skills are conducted by trained students. Seven ways that the reliability of the assessment process is ensured are identified. It is proposed that the interpersonal climate among students and staff will be functional to the degree that the following factors are maintained: a shared goal that transcends daily procedures, open and unrestricted communication channels, the self-esteem of every person is enhanced, and course directors believe that climate is a key factor. Advantages of involving students as assessors in the interpersonal communication lab are discussed. (SW)

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A DESCRIPTION OF A STUDENT-STAFFED, COMPETENCY-BASED LABORATORY FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Sharon A. Ratliffe and David D. Hudson

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Circa: Nov. 2

A Description of a Student-staffed, Competency-based Laboratory for the Assessment of Interpersonal Communication Skills

Sharon A. Ratliffe and David D. Hudson - title p. 17 for title + abstract.

The success of postsecondary students in college and subsequently on the job is dependent on their mastery of basic skills. Oral communication has been legislated as a part of the official definition of basic skills through a 1978 amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The College Board announced in it's "Project EQuality" that speaking and listening is one of the six basic academic essentials for college preparation in the 80's (Spectra, 1985). However, the speech communication discipline is still facing questions about the feasibility of assessing speaking and listening skills. Many colleges and universities have attempted to find ways to assess oral communication skills but they have found these skills to be considerably more difficult to assess than reading, writing, or math skills. Consequently, further attempts to establish guidelines for oral communication skill assessment have been limited.

These limitations are particularly evident in the area of interpersonal communication skills where such questions as these arise: How will skill performance of each student in a class be adequately assessed? What skills should be taught and assessed in the interpersonal communication class? How can skill assessment be made economically feasible? How can adequate time be provided for skill assessment? How is

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reliability built into the assessment process? The purpose of this article is to describe the competency-based skill development and assessment procedure used in the interpersonal communication course at Golden West College and to explain the learning climate on which it is dependent.

The Interpersonal Communication course (SpCom 100), as taught at Golden West College, currently averages between 18 and 24 sections per semester with 35 students per section. Students may select SpCom 100 to fulfill the oral communication requirement for the Associate of Arts degree. SpCom 100 is also required by the Nursing and Psychiatric Technician Programs. The course is basically designed to assist each student in (1) developing a broad range of communication skill alternatives to supplement his/her habitual responses in a given situation, (2) determining the criteria to use in selecting the most appropriate way to communicate, (3) implementing these communication choices effectively through verbal and nonverbal means, and (4) evaluating the appropriateness and effectiveness of the ways that he/she chooses to communicate.

The Beginning of the Competency-based Program

We first began assessing student's interpersonal communication skills on a very limited based. In some cases, assessments were conducted during scheduled and extended office hours by instructors. In addition, some instructors incorporated an oral final examination into their course during which students were expected to demonstrate at least two interpersonal skills in

small groups of six to eight students during a 30 minute period.

As a result of these experiences, students who completed SpCom 100, began asking for additional opportunities to develop their skills. Some instructors invited students who had successfully completed SpCom 100 to enroll in an independent study and serve as tutors and skill assessors in their SpCom 100 classrooms. At the same time, these student tutors were working outside of the class with the instructor to improve their own skills in preparation to help teach other students the skills. This approach met with enthusiasm from the students enrolled in SpCom 100, from the students on independent study, and from the instructors. Therefore, SpCom 240 (Tutoring Communication) was inaugurated as a 3 credit course requiring a two hour staff meeting each week and three hour practicum during which enrolled students work with students in SpCom 100 on skill development and assessment (Ratliffe, 1984).

SpCom 240 has been in existence for five years and is offered each semester and during Summer session. The first time the class was offered, five students enrolled and two instructors team taught the course. Together, they developed five skill descriptions that students in the majority of sections of SpCom 100 would use to demonstrate and be assessed on to determine their competency. Both students and instructors conducted skill assessments in a room containing four tables with chairs which was designated as the "Speech Lab." Students in SpCom 100 visited the lab to demonstrate and receive feedback on each of the five skills. They did so on their own time as a

homework assignment.

Since the instructors who incorporated the competency-based skill requirement into their course used a point-based grading system, students were assigned scores of 25, 20, 15, 10, or 5 to their demonstrations. It was agreed that students must attempt each skill (a score of 5) to receive a final grade of "D" in the course. They must receive a score of 15 (minimum competence) to be eligible for final grades of "C" or higher. To reinforce that the lab is not a testing area, but a learning area, students were encouraged to return to the lab as often as they wished with no penalty to demonstrate a skill and attempt to raise their level of competence, and score. Their highest score was the score of record. Most students returned until they earned a Mastery (score of 25).

By instituting the SpCom 240 class both in response to student requests for more skill preparation and to instructor desires to provide competency-based instruction, we were able to provide a structure for the assessment of interpersonal communication skills. We answered the question of how to assess each student by providing a Speech Lab and requiring at least five visits. Creating the out-of-class requirement also eliminated the problem of using class time for individual assessments. The skills to be taught and assessed were determined jointly by the students and instructors of the SpCom 240. Economic feasibility was achieved by using course credit to generate personnel for a Speech Lab that was created by converting two small lab rooms already assigned to the Speech

Communication Department. SpCom 240 provided the arena for training assessors and building reliability into the program.

The Present Competency-based Program

After the Speech Lab had been in existence for one year, the members of the Department agreed to make the lab component to the SpCom 100 course a departmental requirement. Therefore, all students who enroll in the course have the opportunity for competency-based skill development and assessment. The concept of the Speech Lab has evolved into a Speech Communication Center with competency-based laboratory components for four additional courses:

1. SpCom 020 Pronunciation Skills for Non-Native Speakers of English
2. SpCom 025 Speaking and Listening Skills for Non-Native Speakers of English
3. SpCom 105 Public Speaking
4. SpCom 130 Work-Related Communication Skills

In addition, all students enrolled in each of these courses are pre- and post-assessed for both critical listening skills and communication apprehension. SpCom 011 (Listening Lab) provides students with an open-entry/open-exist course that is based on a self-paced program to improve critical listening. (Sartain, 1975). SpCom 12 (Communication Confidence Lab) provides students with a six week course designed to promote the reduction of communication anxiety as measured by the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension - 24 (McCroskey, 1982; Richmond and

McCroskey, 1985). Sessions of this lab are provided twice each semester. A half credit may be earned for each lab. SpCom 011 is under the direction of a certificated instructor who coordinates the Speech Communication Center. Certificated instructors also teach SpCom 012.

While considerable student and faculty volunteer hours went into the development of the Center; at present, all interpersonal communication skill assessments are conducted by students who receive either credit in SpCom 240 or an hourly pay as student assistants (Hudson and Ratliffe, 1986). Faculty volunteer time has been reduced mainly to the Public Speaking Lab. These faculty meet students by appointment for up to two hours weekly for approximately ten weeks of the course. These hours may be included as part of the five required office hours faculty must provide weekly.

As the Speech Lab has evolved into the Speech Communication Center, we have acquired a new facility equivalent in size to three classrooms. In addition, financial support for the operation of the entire Center presently includes: (1) the continuation of assigning six F.T.E.'s to the SpCom 240 course to be allocated among instructional staff at departmental descretion, (2) six F.T.E.'s of an adjunct instructor's teaching load to provide coordination and supervision of the Center, (3) a $9,000 annual budget to pay student assistants, and (4) a course materials fee of $2.00 per student attached to SpCom 020, 025, 100, and 105 to provide audio and video tapes as well as written materials.

The student assistant budget is used to supplement the Center staff of unpaid tutors who enroll in the SpCom 240 class. To become a paid student assistant, an individual must complete SpCom 240 with a grade of "A" and an interview with the Center Coordinator. The staffing of the Center primarily includes between 20 and 30 SpCom 240 students, depending on course enrollment each semester, and is only supplemented by the paid student assistants. Initially, the SpCom 240 course was team taught. As the skill demonstration requirement for SpCom 100 became departmental, all five full-time instructors teamed the class and received one F.T.E. with the exception of the lead instructor who received two. This year, the department has agreed to return to the configuration of two team teachers who divide the six F.T.E.'s assigned to the course.

The Interpersonal Communication Course and Laboartory Component

SpCom 100 is our largest course with from 18 to 24 sections offered each semester. Therefore, it continues to account for most of the activity that takes place in the Center. At present, students enrolled in SpCom 100 continue to be introduced to the theories and research related to initiating and maintaining successful interpersonal relationships. The course includes eight units of study:

1. The Interpersonal Process
2. Conversation
3. Self-concept and Disclosure
4. Perception

5. Verbal Language
6. Nonverbal Communication and Emotions
7. Listening and Feedback
8. Assertion and Conflict Management

Simultaneously, all students are taught seven competency-based skills which they practice in the classroom and are required to demonstrate with a partner outside of the classroom in the Interpersonal Communication Laboratory now housed in the Speech Communication Center (Ratliffe and Hudson, 1987). These seven skills are developmental and must be completed in the following sequence:

1. Initiating and Managing a Conversation
2. Clarifying Perceptions
3. Using Descriptive Langauge
4. Expressing Emotions
5. Using Active Listening
6. Responding with Relational Feedback
7. Using Assertive Messages

Student skill demonstrations are currently assessed as meeting the minimum criteria for one of three performance levels: Mastery, Satisfactory, or Needs to be Repeated. Instructors who grade based on a point system translate these ratings into scores of 15, 10, and 5. As when the Speech Lab was initiated, students return to repeat skill demonstrations with no penalty, and the highest rating the student obtains is the one of record. It is a departmental requirement that a student must receive a score of at least Satisfactory, the equivalent of minimum competence, to

earn a grade of "C" or better in the course. To obtain a final grade of "D," a student must attempt each skill at least once.

The dimensions of the competency-based laboratory component to SpCom 100 can best be described by using the Center statistics for one semester. For the purpose of illustration, 22 sections of SpCom 100 were offered during the 1986 Spring Semester. Over the course of an 18-week semester, 4,025 separate skill demonstrations and assessments were conducted. This figure includes 292 demonstrations (13 percent) during which students repeated skill demonstrations to raise their ratings. The assessments were conducted exclusively by trained students.

Maintaining Reliability among Student Assessors.

The reliability of the assessment process is ensured in at least seven ways:

1. The seven skill descriptions provided to all SpCom 100 students are written in behaviorally descriptive language to clearly operationalize what a student must demonstrate to receive each of the three ratings of Mastery, Satisfactory, or Needs to Be Repeated. These skill descriptions have evolved over the past five years. They are revised as necessary once each Spring with the input of adjunct faculty and SpCom 100 and 240 students.
2. The period during which all full-time instructors taught the SpCom 240 class provided an opportunity to train oursevles in teaching and assessing the skills in ways that provide uniformity across all sections of the class with regard to the seven skills, yet permits individual style in teaching the conceptual framework

in which the skills exist. In addition, each full-time instructor acts as a "buddy" to one or more adjunct instructors to provide continuity and assistance.

3. In the SpCom 240 class, students must demonstrate the ability to perform each of the seven skills at a mastery level while being assessed by a classmate. SpCom 240 students also receive an evaluation by an instructor on their ability to provide descriptive feedback and an accurate evaluation in a supportive manner. No student may assess a skill in the Center until this process is completed satisfactorily for that skill.

4. In the Center, SpCom 240 students are assessed a second time by one of the course instructors during an actual assessment with a SpCom 100 student. These assessments occur for at least four of the seven skills during the semester.

5. The paid student assistants are assessed by the Center Coordintor on their ability to both demonstrate and assess skill. In addition, the Coordinator visits the SpCom 240 class on those days when skill assessments occur to assist the two instructors in the process. This procedure provides for communication and coordination between the Center and the classroom.

6. At the end of each semester, student personnel in the Center are evaluated on a written instrument by students in all sections of SpCom 100. Questions provide a method of determining the need to revise methods in ways that continue to insure reliability.

7. While the opportunity is seldom used, students in all classes are informed that they may choose to be assessed on a skill demonstration by their instructor instead of by a student.

Interpersonal Climate as the Key Factor in the Program

The approach taken at Golden West College provides a structure for organizing the content and procedures that facilitate interpersonal competence and it's assessment. The approach is financially feasible. However, we have discovered that the key factor in our success has not been the structure and budget; but the interpersonal climate that is maintained among students and instructional staff (Roueche and Baker, 1987).

Every classroom has an interpersonal climate. The term "climate" refers to the psychological tone or feel of the relationships among the learners present. Climate is to the learners in the classroom what personality is to an individual. Maintaining a positive climate is a major goal of classroom instruction. However, in SpCom 240 and in the Center, high level maintenance of the interpersonal climate is a requirement for the successful operation of a laboratory approach to competency-based instruction in SpCom 100. It cannot be only an ideal because the SpCom 240 class, and particularly the Center, serves as the working model for the concepts, theories, and skills students learn in SpCom 100. The Center is the place where the worth and credibility of the course content and the competency-based approach to it is either demonstrated or diminished by the ways in which the Center staff interacts with each other, with instructors, and with the students they serve.

We maintain the interpersonal climate at a high level by recognizing that the Speech Communication Center is an organizational system and, as such, everyone and every event that

occurs in it is related in a synergistic manner. Since interpersonal communication is our business, the interpersonal climate plays a significant role as an ever-present process that exists along a continuum from dysfunctionality to functionality. We believe that the interpersonal climate will be functional to the degree that we provide maintenance to four factors (Carrigan and Carrigan, 1985):

1. A Shared Goal that Transcends Our Daily Procedures. Students and instructors alike share increased interpersonal competence as a goal that transcends the day-by-day operations of our program since it's inception five years ago. Both students and instructors participate in the continual redefinition of this transcending goal and in the processes and structure in the Center that implements the goal. This process includes an end-of-the-semester questionnaire for receiving feedback from all SpCom 100 students as a method of holding ourselves accountable to them, other students, and to our shared vision.

2. Open, unrestricted channels of communication. It is mandatory that the free-flowing exchange of accurate and complete information be ensured on a continuing basis among instructors, between students and instructors, and among students. Open communication facilitates the day-by- day operation of the Center as well as the maintenance of our transcending goal of achieving increased degrees of communication competence.

3. Enhancing the self-esteem of every person. The existence of protective defenses among individuals tends to signal that the communication channels are more closed and blocked than open and

unrestricted. When students and instructors reinforce for each other their importance of open, unrestricted communication in the maintenance of the Center and our mutual goal, then protective, dysfunctional behaviors (i.e., passivity, burnout, blaming, sub-group animosities, adversarial and confrontational relationships, mistrust, low morale, and diminished productivity and creativity) are less likely to exist. A major factor in maintaining high levels of self-esteem is the encouragement of all persons to participate in decision-making regarding Center functions and then incorporating their suggestions. This participative process also has been found to increase the students' commitment to carrying out decisions that they have helped to develop. Another factor involves giving individuals the responsibility to assess others, the training to make their assessments valid and reliable, and providing feedback with encouragement, support, and additional training when necessary.

4. Course directors who believe in climate as the key factor. The course directors must believe that climate is of utmost importance and must commit their energies and reward the energies of other students and instructors in the program in ways that achieve high levels of individual self-esteem, open communication among all personnel, and the transcending vision of the importance of interpersonal communication competence.

The course directors, and in turn the faculty of the Department, believe that instructors and students each bring specific expertise to the mutual goal of developing interpersonal competence. Instructors bring an understanding of the theory and

principles of interpersonal communication and the practical application each has made of that knowledge in his/her own relationships. Each instructor not only has an understanding of the theoretical content that underlies the skills in the program, but also a personal style of competence that has resulted from the application of these principles to his/her own relationships. Each student potentially brings an eagerness to communicate more effectively in his/her personal relationships. Each student also brings a keen awareness of when learning in the classroom or Center does or does not have relevance for his/her everyday life. The feedback provided by one student to another has a relevance that instructors cannot have. As communication experts, instructors can only attempt to empathize with what it is like to communicate when an individual's profession is not communication.

The individual expertise of instructors and students in SpCom 240 and SpCom 100 merges to achieve the transcending goal of maintaining a sturcture of methods for facilitating interpersonal competence within the Speech Communication Center. This structure and these methods are a result of integrating our understanding of the theory and principles of interpersonal communication with communication skills as we have been applying them in our personal relationships and in our classrooms and communication laboratory. It is the uniqueness of the points of view of each student and instructor that creates a situation rich for learning from each other as peers, regardless of our roles.

Advantages of This Approach

There are several advantages that we have found from involving students as assessors in our Interpersonal Communication Lab: (1) SpCom 240 students have an opportunity to increase their personal effectiveness in using the communication skills they are evaluating, as well as learning the skills of providing descriptive feedback and assessment. (2) SpCom 100 students who are using the Center have the advantage of one-to-one demonstration and evaluation of the skills that are basic to competency in interpresonal communication. (3) Both SpCom 100 and SpCom 240 students report a high level of satisfaction in working with each other in the Center. (4) Faculty report an increase in the interest level of students enrolled in SpCom 100, as well as an increased interest among students in taking additional speech communication courses. (5) The cost of individual skill assessment is minimized. (6) Students are given employment opportunities on campus and letters of recommendation can be placed on file for students at their request. (7) Indirectly, students establish and learn about communication in an organizational setting.

In addition, there are at least six important advantages to a competency-based approach for learning interpersonal communication: (1) This approach provides an opportunity to individualize instruction by allowing students to learn communication skills at their own rate and to repeat skill demonstrations as necessary. As a result, all students can master learning objectives. (2) This approach meets accountability

needs by focusing a student's efforts toward learning objectives rather than on competing with other classmates. In contrast to the more traditional, norm-referenced procedures (i.e., the A through F grading system) which are designed to differentiate one student's performance of behavior from the performance of others, this competency-based approach makes no effort to compare students to each other. (3) This approach reduces uncertainty among students about what is required in order to succeed. (4) When the approach is used across multiple sections of an interpersonal communication course, it eliminates most of the inconsistency that often exists among instructors. (5) This approach provides a possible means of pre- and post-assessment which can facilitate the placement of students at levels of instruction which match their abilities. (6) This approach provides a method for achieving a major goal of general education which is to assist students in thinking both logically and critically about themselves and the ways they interact with others.

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